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Life by Design

As a top-shelf illustrator and art director, Maria Gonzalez '08 draws attention with her graphics magic.

Story by KIM HILL

Photo by LLOYD DEGRANE

Maria Gonzalez '08 has been winning art contests since the second grade. That streak continued at Illinois Wesleyan, where she took a “Best of Show” award in the annual senior art exhibition. But even she was surprised by her latest win, taking the top prize in an annual contest for illustrators sponsored by *PRINT*, the graphic design industry’s leading trade publication.

Karli Petrovic, who is *PRINT*’s associate editor, wrote in the magazine’s August issue that Gonzalez “stole the show with a colorful, font-driven depiction of her mother’s home in Mexico.”

It was a contest she nearly missed. One Friday night at Arc Worldwide, an advertising agency in Chicago where she was a senior art director, Gonzalez was desperately trying to finish a project so she could make it to a much-anticipated concert with friends. Her boss and creative director stopped by her desk and inquired about an intriguing set of letters floating on her computer’s screensaver — letters which spelled out “Mi Casa No Tu Casa” (My Home Not Your Home).

Gonzalez explained that the designs were inspired by a recent trip she took to her mother’s hometown of Guanajuato, in a region known as Mexico’s heartland. Everywhere Gonzalez and her mother went, local artisans were showing handmade *alebrijes*, a folk-art form originating with Pedro Linares. The Mexico City artist made papier-mâché figurines of fantastical creatures inspired by dreamlike visions he saw while suffering a high fever.



Maria Gonzalez '08

As an art major at IWU with a concentration in graphic design, Gonzalez had taken several art history classes, yet she’d never seen work like the *alebrijes*. Wanting to introduce more people to the beauty of the art form, she says she “started to draw them, playing around with phrases and thinking of everything that had inspired me on the trip, from my mom’s memories of her home to all the art we had seen.”

When her boss caught a glimpse of her first experiment with the style, he encouraged her to submit *Mi Casa No Tu Casa* to *PRINT*’s annual contest. According to Gonzalez, the rest of the conversation that Friday evening went like this:

Gonzalez: “It’s not finished yet. I have all these other ideas for it.”

Creative Director: “You’re overthinking it. It’s done. It’s beautiful. Submit it.”

Gonzalez: “Well, okay, I’ll submit it later.”

Creative Director: “No, the deadline for the contest is today. Submit it. Submit it right now.”

Gonzalez: “No, I have plans for tonight!”

Creative Director: “What do you mean, you have plans for tonight? This could be your career deal-breaker. Just submit it.”



Each letter in "Mi Casa No Tu Casa" represents an aspect of Gonzalez's mother's home in Mexico. The figure seen in the first "S," for example, depicts a woman who passed her mother's window each morning on her way to work at the mill.

And so Gonzalez postponed her evening plans to prepare her entry in the "Hand Drawn Illustrations" category — and mostly forgot about it until she was informed she had won.

Sherri McElroy, professor of art/graphic design at IWU, says the selection of "Mi Casa" for a top prize was no surprise to her. "Early in Maria's career, her command of bold graphic color and composition stood out. She's always had the confidence to communicate her narrative in an engaging manner."

Gonzalez's own narrative, from second-grade art contest winner to ad agency art director, is mostly linear. She says one of her earliest memories was finding her mother's sketchbook in their Chicago home and demanding to know whose "coloring book" it was.

"I couldn't believe it was hers because she's my mom, not someone who makes art," Gonzalez laughs now. "Moms don't do that."

Although her mother regarded her art as strictly a hobby, she encouraged her daughter to pursue her own artistic vision, with tips on ways to improve her early drawings.

Gonzalez's parents often brought her to Chicago's many art museums, and enrolled her in city art programs. Even as a child, her work was exhibited in galleries. As she began to think about college, however, Gonzalez was leery of enrolling at an art school.

"I never thought of art as a career," she explains. "It was just something I enjoyed. I had many interests and wasn't sure of what I really wanted to do with my life, and I felt that if I went to art school, that meant I had to do art."

"I was also really good at other things and as I looked at colleges, my first question was always, 'Can I double-major in separate schools?' Illinois Wesleyan was one of only a few colleges that would allow me to do that."

Even though she didn't really consider art as a career, Gonzalez declared the art major quickly at Wesleyan. She loved the intimacy and collaboration of the graphic design courses. Gonzalez recalls McElroy as a huge influence. "It was through her that I even discovered design magazines like PRINT, which she made available to us for inspiration," says Gonzalez. "Sherri brought in people to look over our portfolios, and she encouraged us to explore different design paths within graphic design."

Yet Gonzalez, who had added a second major in business administration, was still unsure of her own career path until former Assistant Professor of Business Carrie Trimble suggested she try an internship at an advertising agency. In the summer of her junior year, Gonzalez worked at the San Jose Group, a Chicago-based multicultural marketing and advertising agency. Something clicked when she realized she was applying elements from both her business and graphic design classes at the same job. "It just felt like everything from all my coursework was fitting together."



As a child visiting her mother's home in Mexico, Gonzalez imagined a dog howling at a full moon would turn into a coyote. That memory is expressed in the "X" from her boldly colored, hand-drawn alphabet — a segment of which "stole the show" in an annual contest sponsored by PRINT magazine.

Gonzalez completed two more internships during her Wesleyan years, including one at Chicago's Instituto del Progreso Latino, headed by Juan Salgado '91. In all her internships, Gonzalez says she tried to do something memorable to make herself stand out. McElroy notes that Gonzalez had a knack for combining her creativity with a strong work ethic. "I recall one of her stories at an internship where she stayed up all night making a skirt out of real fruit for a photo shoot the next day," says McElroy. "I'm sure her creative director at the time was quite impressed."

After a senior-year internship at Wunderman — ranked by *Advertising Age* as the top global digital agency network — Gonzalez worked as a contract freelancer for Wunderman for two years. When all freelancers were let go, her creative director at Wunderman recommended her to a colleague at Arc Worldwide, the marketing-services arm of the Leo Burnett Group. Recently she moved from Arc to Leo Burnett but retains the title of senior art director.



Gonzalez designed these pieces for her final graphic design class at IWU. She included the self-portrait on her resume application for internships.

Gonzalez describes her current job as "very fulfilling yet a learning experience every day." Working on high-profile accounts such as Whirlpool and Comcast, she must think like her target consumer — where the customer shops, what she wears, what her home looks like, even down to the details of her favorite color and the name of her dog.

"It's interesting work because you really have to *be* her," says Gonzalez. As an example of her determination to put herself in the customer's shoes, she attended NASCAR auto races one weekend to better understand the sport's rabid fan base while working on the account at Wunderman.

She says the rules and guidelines she must follow for a particular client can be exacting. "If I must always put the logo in the right-hand corner, for example, it's my job as a designer to solve the challenge of creating something beautiful when I have all these rules to follow," she says. "That's exciting, but it's also exciting when I have no rules," as with her personal projects such as *Mi Casa*.

A good place to see Gonzalez work her unfettered magic is her website (www.theonlymaria.com), where colorful shapes, both familiar and fantastical, seem to burst from the screen. Recent additions on her Facebook page include a GIF animation of a juggling kitten, a snazzily attired "bull woman," and designs for everything from t-shirts to throw pillows. A gallery show of her work is also being planned.

Whether creating an effective brand concept for a corporate client or drawing fantastical images inspired by her heritage, Gonzalez says it's all an expression of "my love for design. I'm fascinated by the idea of using design to tell a story."

TO VISIT MARIA GONZALEZ'S WEBSITE, [CLICK HERE](http://www.theonlymaria.com).

TO VISIT THE WEBSITE OF THE UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF ART, [CLICK HERE](#).